

How to Make Money from a Border

by Mike Prokosch

“Poor Mexico,” goes the saying, “so far from God and so close to the United States.” The saying is particularly true for Mexican workers, who have been pulled into the United States when employers needed more labor and pushed out when they didn’t.

California agriculture expanded in the 1920s, and growers put Mexican migrants to work in their fields. In the 1930s, when the Depression created massive unemployment, Mexican farmworkers (and U.S. citizens of Mexican descent) were rounded up and deported. American people forced to abandon their own farms in the Dust Bowl picked the grapes and lettuce instead. Come the 1940s, World War II created a labor shortage in the fields, and Mexicans were brought back. Their employment status was formalized in the Bracero Program of the 1950s. Even after the program ended in 1964, Mexican workers kept coming, legally or illegally, because back home, their farming villages were getting poorer and poorer.

For U.S. growers, Mexicans conveniently extended the U.S. economy. When U.S. workers couldn’t do the work at the price growers wanted, they’d call a Mexican. When they didn’t need him, they shipped him back. Now, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1994, is causing more Mexicans to leave their homes in search of work. One important reason is corn. For a half century before NAFTA, Mexican farm policies had kept millions of people on the land. Corn is the center of Mexico’s diet and traditional culture. The Mexican government’s corn-growing subsidies helped small farmers survive and provided cheap corn for working people in the cities. Mexico’s Constitution banned the sale of community-owned farmland, so families stayed in their villages.

But to qualify for NAFTA, Mexico’s govern-

ment repealed the corn subsidies for farmers and the land policy. The cost of growing Mexican corn leaped in price while under NAFTA, cheap U.S. corn flooded Mexico’s markets. Some researchers think NAFTA forced two million Mexicans off their farms. Many crossed the border, including most of the 500,000 undocumented workers who enter the U.S. every year.

NAFTA also opened up Mexico to U.S. companies. Small and medium Mexican-owned businesses, which employed many people, closed as U.S. corporations moved in. Wal-Mart is now Mexico’s biggest retailer. For every job Wal-Mart creates there, about one and a half jobs are lost. And, according to the Mexico Solidarity Movement, Wal-Mart sends most its profits to the U.S.,

Dust Bowl

In the mid to late 1930s, a series of dust storms scoured the southern plains in portions of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. These storms were caused by great droughts and decades of unwise agricultural practices such as the removal of grass during plowing.

During these storms, the simple acts of everyday life were no longer simple. Children had to wear dustmasks to school, housewives had to hang wet sheets over windows to try and keep out the dust, and farmers were unable to plant or grow their crops. Dust drifted like snow and completely covered some farms. Many people abandoned their farms and migrated to other parts of the country to look for jobs.

leaving Mexico with less money to create jobs.

National Public Radio reported that altogether, U.S. companies now employ 40% of workers in Mexico. Just before NAFTA, Mexican workers earned 15 percent of US workers' wages. By 2002 they'd fallen to 12 percent, and Mexico's poverty rate had risen from 45.6 percent in 1994 to 50.3 percent in 2000 according to Jeff Faux, author of *The Global Class War*.

NAFTA opened the U.S.-Mexican border but just for money and goods. Not for people.

Many companies want cheap workers—without U.S. citizenship, subject to discrimination and racism, unaware of U.S. labor law, sometimes undocumented. Mexicans have long been that kind of worker, first for our fields and now for hotels, restaurants, builders, landscapers,

hospitals, and cleaning and security companies. This treatment of Mexican workers is nothing new. Policies, old and new, continue a cycle that exploits and disrespects workers—as if they were disposable—while padding the pockets of CEOs and giving us cheap foods and consumer goods. Is this all just part of capitalism—an inconvenient truth that keeps our economy growing?

We must decide what we want: a country where some people and companies take such unjust advantage of workers or a nation that demands that employers uphold the human rights of all workers—and we must decide what we are willing to trade for it.

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